NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 10-90)

408

OMB No. 1024-0018

RECEIVED 2280
MAR 12 1996
NAT. REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. (Lands End Rd), S. of its intersection with U.S. Hwy. 21 not for publication ___

city or town St. Helena Island vicinity ___

state South Carolina code SC county Beaufort code 013 zip code 29920

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant __ nationally __ statewide X locally.
(___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Mary W. Edmonds 3/6/96
Signature of certifying official Date

Mary W. Edmonds, Deputy SHPO, S.C. Department of Archives & History, Columbia, S.C.
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.
(___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

_____ _____
Signature of commenting or other official Date

_____
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

✓ entered in the National Register
___ See continuation sheet.
___ determined eligible for the National Register
___ See continuation sheet.
___ determined not eligible for the National Register
___ removed from the National Register
___ other (explain): _____

Edson H. Beall 4.12.96
Entered in the National Register

_____ _____
Signature of Keeper Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- X private
- ___ public-local
- ___ public-State
- ___ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- X building(s)
- ___ district
- ___ site
- ___ structure
- ___ object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	___	buildings
___	___	sites
___	___	structures
___	___	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Historic Resources of St. Helena Island, S.C.

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:	Sub:
SOCIAL	Meeting Hall

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:	Sub:
SOCIAL	Meeting Hall
COMMERCE/TRADE/OTHER	Upholstery Shop

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)
No Style

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation	Concrete
roof	Asphalt
walls	Concrete
other	

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- X **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ___ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ___ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ___ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

____ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
____ B removed from its original location.
____ C a birthplace or a grave.
____ D a cemetery.
____ E a reconstructed building, object,or structure.
____ F a commemorative property.
____ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)
Ethnic Heritage/Black
Social History

Period of Significance
ca. 1942-1945

Significant Dates
ca. 1942

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation
N/A

Architect/Builder

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)
___ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
___ previously listed in the National Register
___ previously determined eligible by the National Register
___ designated a National Historic Landmark
___ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
___ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary Location of Additional Data
X State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State agency
___ Federal agency
___ Local government
___ University
___ Other
Name of repository: S.C. Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	17	540800	3584140	3			
2				4			

___ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Laura Hansen, Consultant for Penn Community Services, Inc.

organization _____ date 27 July 1995

street & number 242 West 72nd Street, #1R telephone (212) 787-7468

city or town New York state NY zip code 10023

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps
A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs
Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Knights of Wise Men Lodge, c/o Mr. Harry Mack

street & number Penn Center, P.O. Box 126 telephone _____

city or town St. Helena Island state S.C. zip code 29920

The Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall is a simple rectangular form, measuring approximately 23' x 35', with a gabled (end to front) roof. The front facade extends above the roofline in a stepped fashion, a form common to vernacular commercial structures. In the Beaufort area there are numerous examples of this form, but this hall is unusual as a two-story building whose stepped facade is more elaborate in size and contour than most others.

The facade fenestration is asymmetrical. The single-door front entrance is flanked by casement windows, one on its south side and two on its north side. Two eight-over-eight sash windows punctuate the second floor front, or east, facade. The north side facade has two ground-floor windows (six-over-six sash) and three second-story windows (six-over-six sash), placed between each concrete pier along the exterior walls, with the western-most upper-story window placed directly over the eastern-most ground floor window. The south side facade has windows on the second floor only; their placement corresponds to their counterparts on the north facade. The rear, or west, facade has a single-door entrance on both the ground floor and on the second floor; the latter is reached by a wooden staircase and is partially covered by a small, wooden porch roof. There is one second-story window, asymmetrically placed over the ground-floor door. A small shed-like pump house sit at the rear of the building.

Its floor plan is utilitarian in design. One room over one room provides the Lodge with a large, open meeting space upstairs, and a flexible rental space on the ground floor. The building's interior walls and floors are unfinished, except for a paneled partition wall separating a small bathroom and kitchenette from the main space on the ground floor. Concrete block piers divide the open space.

The hall's traditional construction is apparent by the wooden lintels and concrete piers extruding from the side walls at regular intervals (one of these also houses the chimney on the south facade). While there is no written record of when this building was constructed, interviews with Lodge members indicate that it was built ca. 1942.[1] It was designed by the Lodge brothers and built by local masons.

---

[1]Lodge member Sam Williams joined the armed services in 1942. When he left St. Helena, the Knights of Wise Men met in a wood-frame building; when he returned from World War II, the concrete-block building had been constructed and was in use. Harry Mark remembered waiting at the concrete-block Lodge Hall for his ride to work when he was eighteen (in 1944). Mrs. Lula Holmes of St. Helena was told by a resident of his memory of driving by the smoldering wood-frame hall on his way to work doing construction on Parris Island in the early 1940s. Almost all other Lodge members interviewed recalled that the present Lodge Hall was constructed either just before or during the war years. Interviews with Henry Chambers, former proprietor of Burton Block Company of Beaufort, helped confirm the date of construction to the 1940s.

While many of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century plantation communities on St. Helena Island had burial aid societies, the Knights of Wise Men's prominent location at the Corner gave it a special prestige. The Corner, at the intersection of the Main Road (later U.S. Highway 21) and Church Road (later Lands End Road, and still later, Martin Luther King, Jr., Drive), has been the commercial center of St. Helena Island since the Civil War. Most shopping was done here at the Corner Store, and the Corner Office next door kept public records and offered credit to island residents; the Corner Store and Office was listed in the National Register in 1988. The Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall is located at the rear of The Green (now Martin Luther King, Jr., Park), the traditional gathering place for island-wide celebrations, which was also listed in the National Register in 1988. On holidays, when St. Helena residents and thousands of others would gather at the Green, the Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall was used as both a dance hall and a jail. For many years the following inscription was painted prominently on a sign on the facade of the hall itself or on a sign there:

Pilgrim Lodge No. 1
Knights of Wise Men
Frogmore, S.C. Organized 1870[2]

The Knights of Wise Men Lodge of St. Helena Island was organized in 1870 as a fraternal order. Its mission was to establish a common treasury, providing members with financial and farming assistance in times of sickness and death. Equally important were its social functions, as a means for formal ceremony and a source of fellowship. The Knights of Wise Men was one of more than thirty benevolent societies formed on St. Helena Island between 1870 and 1930.[3] At its height in the early 1920s, the Knights of Wise Men Lodge had more than 350 members, representing almost every plantation community on St. Helena Island.[4] Today, it and two others--one fraternal society and one Ladies Union--continue to function as burial aid societies for St. Helena Islanders.

In 1889, the Knights of Wise Men had purchased a quarter-acre plot on the old Corner Plantation for eight dollars. Sometime thereafter they built the first of two structures. Although there is no documentation for their first building, it is well remembered in the community as a two-story wood-frame building of similar form and size as the existing concrete-block Lodge Hall. This first building burned ca. 1940 and was replaced shortly thereafter--most likely ca. 1942--by the present structure. Members were "taxed" to provide the building fund, and local bricklayers were hired to construct the new Lodge Hall in similar fashion to the first one. Concrete was chosen as the material for reasons of fireproofing, and to create a more "substantial" building. The major design change was to place the stair to the second story on the outside and at the rear of the building to allow privacy for both the Lodge meetings and the first-floor tenants.[5]

---

[2]This inscription is still faintly visible on the facade. It is also printed on the Lodge's membership badge. Member Richard Middleton remembered a story that the Lodge was originally organized with the assistance of a group of black men from Tennessee, which may explain the origin of Pilgrim Lodge No. 1.

[3]"Societies and Lodges," Index to Deeds, Beaufort County Register of Mesne Conveyance, Beaufort County Courthouse, Beaufort, S.C.

[4]Interview by Laura Hansen with Dan Watson, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995.

[5]Interview with Dan Watson, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995.

While the architectural form, construction, and materials of the Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall are simple and straightforward, this building's cultural significance is complex and rich. The Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall is an artifact of a longstanding and important tradition, representing more than a century of the black St. Helena Islanders' struggle to remain independent, self-reliant, and culturally unified.

Burial aid societies flourished in black communities during the Reconstruction era (1865-1877), and they were an essential aspect of African-American life well into the twentieth century. These societies were organized as fraternal orders, as women's unions, or as societies inclusive of all adults and children. They were simultaneously a financial enterprise, an exercise in leadership, a communal protective circle, and an opportunity for pageantry. In 1906, W.E.B. DuBois wrote, "Next to the church they [beneficial societies] are the most popular organizations among Negroes."[6] Their rapid and ubiquitous organization across the South illustrates their importance to black community life. A report from Beaufort in 1880 specifically named six burial societies in the area--the Benevolent Society of the Baptist Church, the Workers of Charity, the Shekinak Society, the Sons and Daughters of Zion, the Knights of Wise Men, and an Independent Order of Odd Fellows--having "an aggregate membership exceeding one thousand, and [with others, owning] eleven buildings and lots valued at $12,000."[7]

By the 1930s, the Charleston News and Courier listed thirty-seven burial aid societies found in the South Carolina Sea Islands. Its description of what was possibly only a portion of the societies in existence offers a revealing glimpse into the attitudes of both whites and blacks toward these institutions:

> Coastal negroes have a strange sort of pride. They may wear rags and tatters, eat most frugally and live in a tumble-down shack while on earth, and they will do so willingly, if their exit herefrom be in a comparative blaze of glory. They have a horror of being buried in a plain pine box by the county and laid in a pauper's grave. . . . And so they invest their earnings in their burial societies, which will assure their leaving this world, upon which they have suffered so much of grief, in a manner after their own heart's desire.[8]

During this period, the relative powerlessness of blacks in white society applied to almost every aspect of life. Pride and independence for blacks came primarily through their churches and these lodges and other societies. The News and Courier's reading of the purpose of such societies most likely mirrored most whites' views, if they knew of the organizations at all. While a proper burial was unquestionably a significant motivation for members of these societies, their function was much broader and richer than simply as a vehicle for the "strange sort of pride" described by the News and Courier. As the Knights of Wise Men Lodge illustrates, these societies were emblematic of the philosophy and spirit that animated Sea Island communities for much of the twentieth century.

---

[6]Walter B. Weare, "Fraternal Orders, Black," in Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris, eds., Encyclopedia of Southern Culture (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 158.

[7]The Handbook of South Carolina (1883), cited in Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody, South Carolina During Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932), p. 372-73.

[8]Chlotilde R. Martin, "Lowcountry Gossip," Charleston News and Courier, undated but placed with other articles from 1936 at the Beaufort County Public Library, Scrapbook # 1.

Like most burial aid societies, the Knights of Wise Men exemplified the cooperative ideal. Members paid monthly dues for which they were assured a substantial sum of money for their funeral and family.[9] In the early years, this money was usually more than enough to cover burial expenses. Dues were twenty-five cents per month for most of the first part of the twentieth century. In recent years, they have increased to $1.25. The death assessment in the early years was $1; today (1995) it is $4.[10] It was optional for members to purchase stock in the Lodge. The Lodge's stock certificate is printed on an elaborate and beautifully rendered full-color image of the Biblical wise men. At the time of this certificate--in the 1930s--a share of stock sold for $5. Upon a member's death, his family was paid the full value of his stock. During the past twenty years or so, the Knights of Wise Men have organized excursions to raise funds, primarily for building maintenance and taxes. These events have included oyster roasts on The Green and bus trips to Myrtle Beach. People from all over St. Helena Island have participated in these outings.[11]

The primary function of the Lodge was care and assistance for its members in times of sickness or death. Harry Mack described it this way:

> We didn't have regular jobs. On the job you don't get benefits, like when you're sick, you get your pay cut. So we had this. We used to do a lot of farming, and when you get sick and can't harvest your crop, a couple of club members will do it for you. If you raised hogs, and can't care for them, they'll do that. And then if someone's sick, we sit with the family, help take care of them while they sick.[12]

Richard Middleton added:

> If you're sick and helpless in your home, we'll go there and take care of you and your family. What we would do, the lodge brothers would get organized and say eight o'clock or whatever hour the family wants you to come in. We'd go and stay all night until about eight o'clock in the morning. We'd usually go in pairs. Then that goes on until you die or get better.[13]

Lodge brothers would deliver and administer medicine, and they would take a member to the Savannah hospital by boat if necessary. All the while, they would see that the farm and household chores, like chopping wood and caring for animals, were maintained. All of this was carefully organized. The Lodge's plantation committees would make assignments when

---

[9]Burial aid societies in and around Charleston and on other Sea Islands were organized in part to purchase cemeteries. Because blacks on St. Helena Island owned much of the land, they were able to hold onto traditional plantaion burial grounds, and later were able to establish church-affiliated cemeteries on their own land. Thus there was no need for the societies on St. Helena to purchase cemeteries.

[10]As membership has rapidly decreased over the past ten years (since 1985), the death assessment has risen to enable a useful total for a deceased member's family. Today (1995) there are fourteen members of the Knights of Wise Men Lodge.

[11]Interviews with Sam Williams and Frank Brown, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995.

[12]Interview with Harry Mack, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995.

[13]Interview with Richard Middleton, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995.

"one of theirs" was sick. Two at a time, the members would sit with the patient. Each night two more would come to serve. The rotation would move from plantation to plantation and would start over again if the illness continued for that long.

It was not uncommon for Islanders to hold more than one membership. Two of the seven members interviewed in this research are members of another lodge in addition to the Knights of Wise Men.[14] Isabella Glen remembers in her Life on St. Helena Island that her father was a member of the Knights of Wise Men, the Blue Mountain Lodge, and the Oak Tree Lodge. She credits the Knights of Wise Men with saving her family's farm the year her father died.[15]

The Knights of Wise Men were leaders in the eyes of St. Helena Islanders.[16] Perhaps the most prominent resident of St. Helena, Dr. York W. Bailey, was the Lodge's Treasurer for many years until he went blind in the 1950s. A native of the Island, Dr. Bailey was the area's first black doctor, and the Island's only doctor for much of the twentieth century. He is fondly remembered both as a doctor and as an officer in the Knights of Wise Men Lodge. His house near the Corner was listed in the National Register in 1988. Officers in the Lodge often served for many years, as long as they were serving the Lodge well in the eyes of the other members. Appointment to membership in this lodge, like most, came through member recommendation. They were the "wise men." While the exact origin of the Lodge's name is unknown, one long-time member has suggested a relationship to the wise men seeking Jesus Christ, and the engraving on an extant stock certificate image would support this theory.

These societies were surely a pragmatic response to difficult circumstances, in an effort to manage collectively sickness and death in rural and racially segregated communities without adequate medical and insurance service. Still, there is scholarly speculation that their structure and form derive from African spiritual beliefs and secret cults. Such writers point out features of these societies that could be imitative of European and American organizational practices. Nonetheless there is strong evidence that the organized "societies" on slave plantations--which were distinctly African in origin--provided the groundwork for the proliferation of burial aid societies during Reconstruction. Indeed, the phenomenon could be seen as an institutionalization of a deep-seated social structure.

Scholars W.E.B. DuBois and Melville J. Herskovits both argue that there is a direct link between the African-American burial societies and African practices.[17] A recent study by Margaret Washington Creel on slave religion and community culture on the Sea Islands explores the African roots of the Gullah transmutation of Christianity, and gives further insight into the origins of burial aid societies among the Islanders. It is widely believed that most Sea Island slaves came from West Africa, and that Gullah culture is derived from that region. Creel's observations about the socioreligious practices of West

---

[14]Jack Johnson and Frank Chaplin are also members of the Young Men's Social Club of Scott Plantation, St. Helena Island.

[15]Isabella C. Glen, Life on St. Helena Island (New York: Carlton Press, 1980), pp. 43-44.

[16]The bricklayer Namon Polite was not a member of the Knights of Wise Men and referred to it as "the lodge for the big shots." Frank Chaplin did not join the Lodge until late in life, and he, too, implied that it had a certain status among the Island's societies.

[17]Weare, "Fraternal Orders, Black," in Wilson and Ferris, eds., Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. p. 158.

African fraternal societies reveal similarities between such tribal organizations which were authorized to intervene in village quarrels, try social offenders, and intensify holiday spirit on great occasions, and the role of Sea Island churches as both law givers and keepers and the lodges as centers for ceremony and pageantry.[18]

In part due to their physical and cultural isolation, and in part due to their African roots, the churches on the Sea Islands served as the de facto judicial system. At certain times, the fraternal lodges became the "official" law enforcers. On celebration days, such as Emancipation Day (January 1st) or Independence Day, members of the Knights of Wise Men were approved by the magistrate or sheriff as deputies for the day with full authority to arrest and detain unruly men. The Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall, located next to The Green where the celebrations were usually held, was used as a temporary jail for such offenders.[19]

Ceremony was a fundamental component of the burial aid societies' organization. Their meetings were formal and standardized, as was their role at members' funerals and the annual "turning out." Monthly meetings were held every second Friday at the Lodge Hall, presided over by the Arckon, or Lodge President, who used a gavel to call the meetings to order and to keep order throughout the proceedings (unruly behavior was subject to fines).[20] The room was arranged like a church with the President facing rows of wooden benches; the Secretary and Treasurer sat to his side, much like deacons in a church. During the 1920s and 1930s there were usually thirty to forty members in attendance at a typical meeting.[21] The opening prayer would be offered by the Chaplain, and was followed by the Lodge song, "Blessed Be the Name of the Lord," kept in its own separate book. Business was conducted regarding recuitment, building maintenance, and other concerns of the Lodge; dues were collected (Lodge funds were kept in a bank in Beaufort); and reports on sick or distressed members were by the committees representing the plantation committees. If new members were being inducted, a secret initiation ritual involving stations was performed.[22] During the meeting a doorkeeper admitted latecomers only if they knew the secret rap. If a death was reported, there was a death assessment, and plans were made for members' attendance at the funeral.

The Knights of Wise Men would often meet at their Lodge Hall prior to a funeral service. In their required dress--black trousers, jacket, tie and shoes, ceremonial hat, and special Lodge badge worn with the black side forward--they would march as a group to the church. There they performed their funeral rites, including songs and a speech on the member's character as a brother in the Lodge. At the burial site, the Knights of Wise Men would file by the grave, each dropping a palm leaf or flower onto the coffin. They

---

[18]Margaret Washington Creel, "A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community Culture Among the Gullahs (New York and London: New York University Press, 1988), pp. 48-49.

[19]All the members of the Lodge interviewed had strong memories of their "policemen" and authority on Island-wide holidays.

[20]The origin and meaning of the title "Arckon" is unknown, and so may date back to the Lodge's founding in 1870.

[21]Interviews with Dan Watson and Jack Johnson, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995.

[22]Interview with Richard Middleton, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995. Mr. Middleton described the stations as locations in the room where various parts of the initiation were performed. This is a common procedure for secret societies, and is also similar to the Catholic ritual for the Stations of the Cross.

occasionally acted as pall bearers or helped make the coffin.[23] There was a moment when the Knights of Wise Men would announce to the family the amount of money they would receive from the Lodge, and a promise was made that within sixty days the Knights would deliver that sum. The President and possibly other officers would later call on the family to deliver the money. Attendance at funerals was mandatory, and absence was subject to a fine of up to $5.00.[24]

The other principal ceremonial time was the Lodge's "turning out," an annual celebration held each year in May, which was an occasion for recruiting new members. For this event, the Knights of Wise Men--this time dressed in white trousers and black coats and ties, and with the red, white, and blue side of their badges showing--made presentations to a different church congregation each year. This often resulted in immediatenew members.[25] These occasions were social ones as well, and often the Ladies' Union (whose own hall was located for many years near the Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall) was invited to participate in festivities outside the Lodge Hall or on The Green.

The pageantry common to burial aid societies was clearly an opportunity to show off, to parade, and generally enjoy a release from the hardships of life. The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture reports that Louis Armstrong fondly remembered his father's participation in a lodge parade. "I was very proud to see him in uniform and his high hat with the beautiful streamer hanging down. . . Yes, he was a fine figure of a man, my dad. Or at least that is the way he seemed to me as a kid when he strutted by like a peacock at the head of the Odd Fellows Parade."[26]

Period accounts of black funeral pageantry illustraties the societies' role in what was clearly a culturally distinct activity. A 1927 article in the Beaufort Gazette by N.L. Willets commented,

> I asked the same question of a friend who owns two thousand acres on St. Helena bordering the Barrier Islands' marsh. He answered "the Negroes about me have four burying grounds on my place. Tradition has always placed these graves on the plantation in remote and out-of-the-way places--and tradition is still at work. I have forbidden future burials. They disturb my whole plantation. Its the 'Society' that does the burying. They make an all day gala matter with marchings and regalia and charge any member of the particular Society of the deceased $2, if he and she do not attend."[27]

Similar accounts also demonstrate many whites' interpretation of such activities as merely derivate of their own funeral customs. In a post-Civil War interview titled "The 'Scursion' Nuisance," one Georgia woman described burial aid society funerals as follows: "When one dies the members all come out in uniform, men and women, and parade up and down the town with white bonnets and black dresses, and in fact, whenever they hear of the death of any brother or sister it is just like a 'scursion' to them." To this the woman's

---

[23]Interviews with Sam Williams and Harry Mack, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995.

[24]Interview with Jack Johnson, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995.

[25]Interview with Richard Middleton, St. Helena Island, S.C., January 1995.

[26]Weare, "Fraternal Orders, Black," in Wilson and Ferris, Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, p. 159.

[27]Beaufort Gazette, October 6, 1927.

interviewer replied, "So that, after all, it is a species of imitation of us a good deal like a Masonic funeral . . . a species of imitation of us superior beings."[28] The ceremony and ritual was likely in part imitative of organizations of European origin, such as the Masons and other guilds. The Masons and the Odd Fellows were the oldest black fraternal orders. Organized by free blacks in Boston and New York, respectively, these organizations were chartered directly from Europe after rejection by the American white orders. They thrived in Northern cities, and even established lodges in a few Southern ones. Free Southern blacks during the antebellum period also organized a number of mutual benefit societies, which were less ritualistic than the orders, and were instead specifically concerned with fulfilling "their obligations to the deceased . . . and to assure their own avoidance of a pauper's burial or worse, disposal of their body to a medical school."[29] Scholars place these organizations in the context of a simultaneous accommodation to white society and assertion of independence.[30] While the same context applies to the Reconstruction-era fraternal orders, there is evidence to support the view that the ritual and organizational features of these societies, particularly on the Sea Islands, evolved out of clandestine slave community societies with decidedly African roots.

Creel's historical analysis of such plantation societies on the Sea Islands demonstrates a probable direct source for their post-Civil War burial aid societies. As early as the 1840s, plantation slaves were organized to join church "societies" by white Baptists. These societies were a vehicle for control as slave membership and attendance in the church increased, and were widespread even before the societies had regular meeting places. In theory, the societies were under the supervision of the white planter; in practice, he was often absent from the plantation and majority of his slaves, and so his hand-picked slave "deacon" served as the official liaison and reporter to the church. The deacon was in turn assisted by several society members to hold the weekly meetings and recruit members. Consequently, the slaves had a good deal of autonomy in both the structure and operation of the church societies. In time, places of worship were built on the individual plantations. These Praise Houses were centers of religious and secular activity and communication.[31] They remained so long after emancipation.

Creel concludes that the "slaves' familiarity with concepts of secret society, membership, and social regulations suggest a relationship to African institutions that Christian ideas

---

[28]Aaron M. Boom, ed., "Testimony of Margaret Ketcham Ward on Civil War Times in Georgia, Part II: The 'Scursion' Nuisance, Georgia Historical Quarterly XXXIX:5 (December 1955). The term 'Scursion," a corrupted form of "excursion," refers to blacks' holiday or other excursions to the beach or to the city--in this case, Chattanooga. These events, sometimes fund-raising events for the lodges, were always festive and sometimes boisterous.

[29]Jack Blicksilver, "Insurance," in Wilson and Ferris, eds., Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, p. 743. See Norrece T. Jones, Jr., Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press and University Press of New England, 1990), p. 201, for a discussion of the practice of selling sick or "diseased" slaves for medical research.

[30]August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 109; see also James M. McPherson, et al, Blacks in America: Bibliographical Essays (Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, 1971), p. 157.

[31]Creel, pp. 229-233.

of a community of believers reinforced." In this way "the black societies served one function for slaves and embodied another for slave owners."[32]

The slaves' apparent ability to separate themselves culturally while functioning within a white organizational structure implies connections to African cult ritual roots and to the later organizations' role as a haven for black social independence. In effect, the Praise House spawned both the church organization and the lodge organization--the two principal institutions in Sea Island life. The Knights of Wise Men, like other fraternal orders, incorporated religious customs into its secular functions and served as both a formal and an informal communication network for the plantation communities on St. Helena Island.

While the cultural roots of African-American burial aid societies will continue to be debated, their legacy is clear. It is most evident in the numerous black-owned banks and insurance companies they spawned in the early twentieth century. The first black bank was an offshoot of an enterprising fraternal order in Alabama in 1888. The Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers was founded in 1881 by an ex-slave, and expanded to also establish many business enterprises, including a newspaper, department stores, a hotel, and a real estate agency, among others.[33] Many other orders followed the True Reformers' lead, primarily establishing insurance companies. The North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, widely recognized as one of the most successful black business enterprises in the country, grew out of another fraternal order, the Royal Knights of King David. Many other societies were a source of financial support, investing their endowment funds in the black business community. Over time insurance companies, which were often associated with funeral homes and/or banks, became both symbol and source of status in southern black communities.[34]

The Knights of Wise Men Lodge currently (1995) has fourteen members. At its height in the 1920s, there were 350 active members from a range of occupations, representing all the "plantation communities" of St. Helena Island. A number of factors have led to the decline in membership. Modernization of Island life along with advances made by the Civil Rights Movement over the past thirty to forty years are two significant reasons for this decline. With health and life insurance more readily available, furthermore, the practical aspects of burial aid societies declined in significance as well, and the encroachment of mainstream culture onto the Sea Islands in the 1950s and 1960s brought Islanders new outlets for recreation and socializing which had been an important role for the Lodge. A number of the Lodge members interviewed for this nomination indicated that the cumulative effect of these factors made it difficult to recruit younger members for the Knights of Wise Men by the early 1980s.

As a center of the African-American Gullah communities throughout the Sea Islands, St. Helena Island is well-known as a historically and culturally distinct place. The Island's early history, particularly its history during the antebellum era, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, is widely recognized on a national level. But the Island's more recent past--a past in which the Knights of Wise Men played a significant role--is an equally compelling period of history in which the slave-based Gullah culture adapted to an entirely new social structure. The Knights of Wise Men Lodge, as a central feature of the Corner community, illustrates how the Gullah people of St. Helena Island built a community and maintained their culture during a long period of struggle for black people all over the South--from the 1870s through the 1960s, and even, one could argue, to the present

---

[32]Ibid., p. 231.

[33]Arnold H. Taylor, Travail and Triumph: Black Life and Culture in the South Since the Civil War (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 109.

[34]Blicksilver, "Insurance," in Wilson and Ferris, eds., Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, p. 743.

day--in the face of a variety of threats to the Gullah way of life. Their efforts to gain and maintain their independence from mainstream political, economic, and social structures are illustrated by such organizations as the Knights of Wise Men.

The legacy of the Sea Islands burial aid societies is an intangible system of values--values of individual and community responsibility, cooperative welfare, and dignity in life and death. For the Knights of Wise Men, this legacy is also a collective memory of the hundreds of community leaders who were members through the years, which is embodied in the tangible artifact of its Lodge Hall. Since 1889 the physical hall--first the frame building and since ca. 1942 the concrete block building--has been a central component of life on St. Helena Island. It stands as quiet testimony to the actions of the Knights of Wise Men and the values they represent.

As part of the Corner community both physically and perceptually, the Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall is a physical manifestation of the evolution of the Gullah cultural identity, and continues to bring a historical dimension to its present-day expression. The Lodge continues to meet--though not on as regular a basis as in years past--and it still maintains a strong presence at the Corner, representing more than a century of cultural continuity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Published Sources

Bleser, Carol K. Rothrock. The Promised Land: The History of the South Carolina Land Commission, 1869-1890. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press for the South Carolina Tricentennial Commission, 1969.

Cooley, Rossa. Homes of the Free. New York: New Republic, 1926.

Creel, Margaret Washington. "A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community Culture Among the Gullah. New York and London: New York University Press, 1988.

Dabbs, Edith M. Sea Island Diary: A History of St. Helena Island. Spartanburg, S.C.: The Reprint Company, 1983.

Franklin, John Hope, and Isidore Starr. The Negro in Twentieth Century America. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

Glen, Isabella C. Life on St. Helena Island. New York: Carlton Press, 1980.

Gordon, Asa H. Sketches of Negro Life and History in South Carolina. Columbia: The State Printing Company, 1970.

Hubka, Frank. "Just Folks Designing: Vernacular Designers and the Generation of Form." In Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach, eds., Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1986.

Hutchinson, Janet. "Better Homes and Gullah." Agricultural History 67:2 (Spring 1992), 102-117.

Johnson, Guion Griffis. A Social History of the Sea Island with Special Reference to St. Helena Island, South Carolina. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930.

Jones, Norrece T., Jr. Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press and University Press of New England, 1990.

Martin, Chlotilde R. "Lowcountry Gossip." Charleston News and Courier (Charleston, S.C.), ca. 1936.

McGuire, Mary Jennie. "Getting Their Hands On The Land: The Revolution in St. Helena Parish, 1861-1900." Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of South Carolina, 1985.

McPherson, James M., et al. Blacks in America: Bibliographical Essays. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, 1971.

Meier, August, and Elliott Rudwick. From Plantation to Ghetto. New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.

Newby, I.A. Black Carolinians: A History of Blacks in South Carolina from 1865-1968. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973.

Reynolds, John S. Reconstruction in South Carolina: 1865-1877. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1905.

Rose, Willie Lee. Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964.

Rosengarten, Theodore. Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986.

Simkins, Francis Butler, and Robert Hilliard Woody. South Carolina During Reconstruction. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932.

Taylor, Arnold H. Travail and Triumph: Black Life and Culture in the South Since the Civil War. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976.

Tindall, George Brown. South Carolina Negroes: 1877-1900. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1949.

Willets, N.L. Article in Beaufort Gazette (Beaufort, S.C.), 6 October 1927.

Wilson, Charles Reagan, and William Ferris, eds. Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

Woofter, T.J. Black Yeomanry: Life on St. Helena Island. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930.

Unpublished Sources

Laura Hanson, Interviews, Beaufort and St. Helena Island, S.C., December 1994-January 1995

Frank Brown, age 86; joined the Knights of Wise Men Lodge in 1934
Frank Chaplin, age unknown; joined the Lodge in the early 1980s
Jack Johnson, age 80s; joined the Lodge in the 1930s; currently (1995) serves as the Arckon (or President) of the Lodge
Harry Mack, age 68; joined the Lodge in the early 1980s
Richard Middleton, age 80s; joined the Lodge in the 1930s
Dan Watson, age 90; joined the Knights of Wise Men Lodge in 1923
Sam Williams, age 79; joined the Lodge in 1944

Henry Chambers, former proprietor of Burton Block Company, Beaufort
Neils Christensen, Christensen Realty and Survey Company, Beaufort
Namon Polite, age 80s; local bricklayer

Index to Deeds, "Societies and Lodges," Beaufort County Register of Mesne Conveyance, Beaufort County Courthouse, Beaufort, S.C.

Beaufort County Deed Books, Beaufort County Register of Mesne Conveyance, Beaufort County Courthouse, Beaufort, S.C.

Miscellaneous Papers of the Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall, St. Helena Island, S.C.
"Routine Business and Ritual of the Knights of Wise Men," n.d.
By-Laws, 1980-present
Annual Celebration Program, 16 May 1982
Stockholders' Certificate, ca. 1930
Member's Badges, n.d.
Financial Receipt Book, n.d.
Meeting Minutes, 1950-present

The following information is the same for each of the photographs:

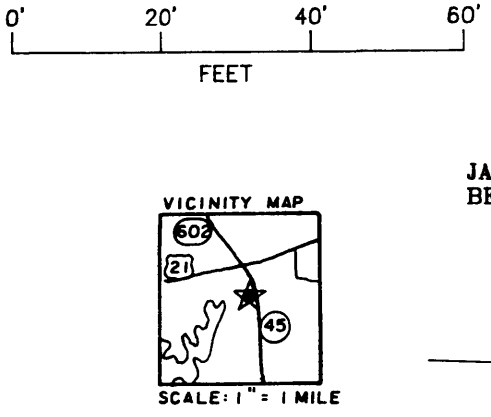
Name of Property:	Knights of Wise Men Lodge Hall
Location:	Martin Luther King, Jr., Drive, St. Helena Island
County:	Beaufort County, South Carolina
Name of Photographers:	Laura Hansen, New York, N.Y.; Joe McDomick, Penn Community Services, St. Helena Island, S.C.
Location of Original Negatives:	S.C. Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C.

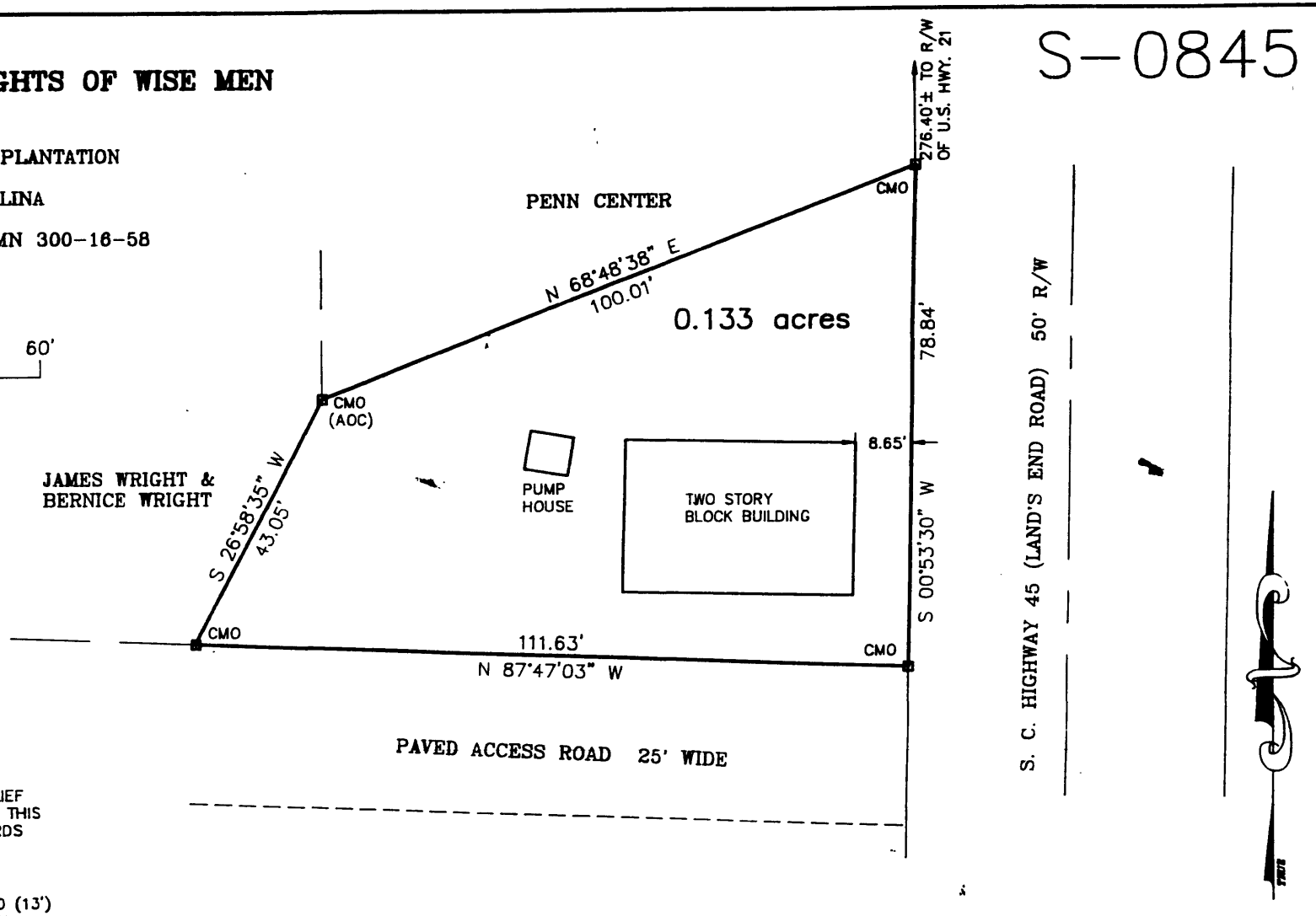
1. West (principal) facade; January 1995
2. North facade; January 1995
3. Looking N on Martin Luther King, Jr., Drive, with The Green just N of the Lodge Hall; January 1995
4. East (rear) facade; July 1995
5. Interior; July 1995
6. Interior; July 1995

PROPERTY OF THE KNIGHTS OF WISE MEN
PILGRIM LODGE

A PORTION OF LOT 5A, CORNER PLANTATION
ST. HELENA ISLAND
BEAUFORT COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA
JULY 27, 1993
REFERENCES: A-559, S-0067, TMN 300-16-58
SCALE: 1" = 20'

S-0845





TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF THESE MEASUREMENTS ARE CORRECT AND THIS SURVEY MEETS OR EXCEEDS THE STANDARDS SET BY THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA. CLASS B SURVEY.

THIS PROPERTY IS LOCATED IN ZONE A-10 (13') AS DETERMINED BY FEMA, FIRM COMMUNITY-PANEL NUMBER 450025 0130 E

SURVEY & PLAT BY: NIELS CHRISTENSEN IV, RLS 13162

LEGEND
CMO = CONCRETE MONUMENT, OLD
AOC = ARTHUR O. CHRISTENSEN

CHRISTENSEN SURVEYING COMPANY
1904 BOUNDARY STREET
BEAUFORT, SC 29902
(803) 524-4148